
Overpeck Park

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Years ago, Overpeck Park was a beautiful wetlands area filled with marsh flowers, wildlife, fish, crabs and oysters. People rented rowboats at the Overpeck Boat Club, the site of crabbing and fishing parties in Overpeck Creek. In the winter, skating parties and ice boating were common on the frozen creek. In the 1920's, the Regional Planning Association of the New York Metropolitan Area visited the area and declared it to be "one of the finest opportunities for preserving an open space of exceptional beauty in the metropolitan area."

Twenty years passed between this observation and the actual formation of a Parks Commission. A master plan was developed for a 1200-acre park with bird and wildlife sanctuaries, golf and pitch and putt course, lake with central docking facility, playgrounds, picnic areas, amphitheatres for concerts, year-round skating facility, a restaurant and space for field sports and court games. Local residents were thrilled. But the execution of the plan was so plagued with delays and legal battles that many thought it might never come true. While Leonians and residents of other surrounding communities waited for their park, the "park" was quickly deteriorating into the county dumping ground. The current entrance to Overpeck Park, north of Fort Lee Road, was the site of the Fort Lee Auto Junkyard, full of old cars and piles of tires. In addition to the smells of burning tires, many Leonians remember the foul smells from burning garbage in the marsh, or oily, black tidal water mixed with sewage. To say the least, Leonia's western border was not a pleasant sight--or smell. Although Leonians weren't happy having a junkyard and a trash dump in their backyard, they hoped it was only temporary--until the development of "the park." In 1951, optimism prevailed and all the surrounding towns officially ceded the land to the county, free of charge, with the stipulation that work would begin within five years. As the 1956 deadline approached and work had not yet begun, real estate agents began eyeing the property for industrial development. Frustrated, many voters wanted to sue the county to get their land back. But, most still wanted their promised park and year after year, voted in support of it. Then, in the sixties, the State Highway Commission came along and laid claim to all land below tide level for Routes 80 and 95. The county put up a fight and won a cash settlement for the land but even so, the highways ate up an additional 200 acres and instead of one park, what remained was 817 cut up acres, separated by six lanes of concrete. With the money from the state, work finally began on the park. An engineer was hired to draw up a master plan in 1963. In 1966, Overpeck Creek was dredged and the resulting muck was used for landfill. The land on the south side of Fort Lee Road was landscaped and a year-round skating rink erected. In 1968, the public golf course in Teaneck was completed. Back in Leonia, a battle was brewing over the 4 1/2 acre auto junkyard property on the north side of Fort Lee Road. The property was included in all original plans and Leonia rezoned the land as residential, in anticipation of condemning it when park development began. But, out of the blue, Rolls Royce selected the junkyard site for their national headquarters. Of fifteen proposed sites in Bergen County, they preferred this to all others. Some town leaders encouraged Leonia to rezone the property again to benefit from the additional revenues from Rolls Royce. The increased revenues were enticing as Leonia had embarked on the construction of a new high school and library. The Council voted 4-1 to rezone so that Rolls Royce could purchase the property. They claimed the Park Commission had not lived up to its promise to properly develop the 127 acres that Leonia had turned over to them in 1950. But Leonians voiced resistance to the Council's decision, arguing that some borough officials were elected on platforms calling for ceding of the land for a park. The junkyard was supposed to be part of the park, was their plea. Giving in now would set a dangerous zoning precedent. The opposition won and the Parks Commission bought the junkyard in 1967 for \$70,000. Fifty years after the original park proposal, Leonia's portion of Overpeck Park was starting to take shape. Garbage, junk, abandoned cars and sludge were used for grading and filling the land north of Fort Lee Road. The old junkyard was gradually transformed into fields for playing football, baseball, soccer and rugby. Lighted courts for tennis, volleyball and basketball were completed. Running tracks, bicycle paths and aerobic workout areas were installed. Graceful willows were planted along Fort Lee Road and throughout the park. Today, Overpeck Park is a popular recreation area. The General Supervisor of Overpeck Park says the park is packed with people from sunrise to sunset--exercising and having fun. He said the skating rink south of Fort Lee Road had to be taken down because the land settled. In its place are picnic grounds and a private horse stable. He also recalled when a huge hole appeared in the middle of the Leonia High School football field ten years ago. When they started digging to discover the cause, they found an old car under the field, one of the many under Overpeck. Its roof had rusted and caved in, leaving a gaping hole in the field. Today, hundreds of people make use of Overpeck Park daily, exercising, picnicking, bicycling, rollerblading, jogging, playing tennis and tossing frisbees. Was Overpeck Park worth the wait, aggravation and lost revenue? You decide.